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Elevating cultural activists

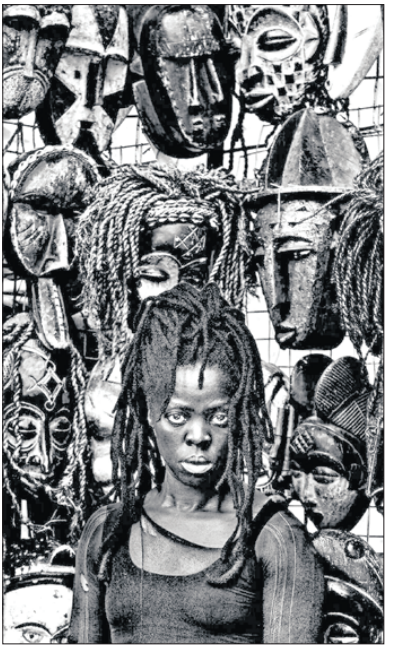
Photographer and visual activist Zanele Muholi explores the taboos of gender fluidity in South Africa, by capturing nonconformists through an Afrofuturist lens, writes **Andrew Robertson**

ZANELE Muholi's ongoing photographic essay, *Brave Beauties*, spans work from more than 10 years. The exhibition showcases the evolution of the artist's photographic projects, where Muholi reaffirms her commitment to activism through visual storytelling.



Muholi has been working with some of the subjects for more than 10 years for the series, which was previously titled *Beulah*.

Brave Beauties is a visual document that presents mainly transwomen, featuring individuals Muholi enjoys working with. It is her appreciation for human beings who are contributing to a great cause in society, as cultural activists daring and risking their lives daily. Some of her subjects are survivors of hate crimes.



The exhibition takes place as the country reaches its 23rd year of democracy, 21 years after the entrenchment of the new South African constitution and 11 years since the legalisation of same-sex marriage. It zooms in on the politics of race and pigment, as well as hate crimes against the LGBTI community.

Her powerful portraits command attention. They are framed in documentary black and white, which vividly explores the subject's sense of identity. The Durban-born artist journeys through the promise of a more open future by exploring gender fluidity and non-conformity.

"For the longest time transgender humans existed," Muholi says. "Due to lack of education and transphobia, our society refuses to accept and understand that they exist. It is a pity that lack of acceptance from homes, schools, work, churches and the health sector continues to exclude transbodies in spaces."

"The workspace is hard for trans people, a lot of them do not have jobs. At schools it's hard for many to complete high school because of being misunderstood."

An activism wall bares the experiences from the lives of the "Brave Beauties" and adds interactive and educational elements.

"There is so much that needs to be written on different walls

in galleries and museums in this country and around the world. I don't think we have said enough; people have suffered a lot, including me. We are survivors.

"Fine art is okay, but visual activism means people don't only come into the gallery to look at images, they get an opportunity to read, learn and feel something."

"Remembering that all those Brave Beauties in the exhibition have their own stories to share, stories of pain and joy, so they should be given opportunities to express themselves in ways they know how," she says.

Brave Beauties exhibits as wallpapers for the first time in Cape Town. Elevated scale spotlights each individual's ownership of space.

"As a human rights and visual activist it is important for me to be in solidarity with all in the LGBTI community. It is my responsibility to help undo the myth that says being homosexual, queer or trans is un-African. We act responsibly and pay taxes in our country and deserve respect just like everyone else," Muholi says.

Speaking about the self-portrait image of herself with black latex gloves, she says: "It speaks on a number of hate crimes in this country; when the cases go to court there is constant lack of evidence because people tamper with evidence. So it speaks about violation of black bodies in different spaces."

"It talks about being infuriated by all this kind of violence, where

The myth says being homosexual, queer or trans is un-African

LGBTI individuals are violated because of being black, queer, trans and because of being disregarded by the system. It forces the viewer to look, think and question whether to touch or not to touch.

"It speaks about many things but mostly violence. It is my way of denouncing violence."

Brave Beauties, shows alongside another exhibition of hers, *Somyama Ngonyama (Hail, The Dark Lioness)*, confronting the politics of race and pigment through self-portraiture.

Muholi is working on a publication for *Brave Beauties* and *Somyama Ngonyama*, scheduled to be out next year. She has just completed the "Brave Beauties Cape Town" chapter.

The exhibition opened on Thursday at the Cape Town branch of the Stevenson Gallery in Woodstock and runs until October 7.

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